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Title: Blue mold found first in Kentucky — again

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Lead:

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“Right now we’re at a loss,” said Dr. Kenny Seebold on his cell phone Thursday as he drove toward Magoffin County.

He was on his way perhaps to solve the mystery of why Kentucky, for the second year in a row, has the season’s first reported case of the blue mold tobacco fungus in the United States.

Normally, Seebold simply would make a phone call on a case of the deadly disease. Not this time. Things are too weird.

First, blue mold should show up first in states farther south. It can’t — at least going by the prevailing view — survive Kentucky winters.

Second, there just aren’t many burley growers left in the eastern Kentucky county of Magoffin, thereby making the odds even smaller it should get the first blue mold sighting in the country. In fact, it wasn’t reported there last year at all.

The first 2005 sighting in the United States was in Hardin County. At that Eastview farm, it managed to destroy 15 to 20 percent of the crop. It also damaged leaves on nearby operations, said Rod Grusy, county Extension agent.

While experts don’t know for sure why Kentucky got a dose of blue mold before even Texas or Florida, theories abound.

This year’s case at least could have traveled here from a transplant shipped in from the South.

Others suggest it can overwinter here. The fungus, which needs living tissue to survive, may endure inside a greenhouse.

Also, a covered outdoor bed may keep the disease alive during the mild winter, as could

ground-level stems. But chances of this are slim.

“We did have a couple of hard freezes, and that should have killed it,” Seebold said.

If it’s from another state’s transplant, quarantines may be in order. On the other hand, if it survived outside, producers should clean up old tobacco fields to stop regrowth of cut plants.

The Magoffin County mold had been growing on an outdoor float bed for more than a week before the University of Kentucky lab identified the disease May 22, according to the Extension service.

Luckily for Hardin County growers, blue mold was spotted in the eastern — not the western — part of the state. Weather systems, which carry the spores, typically travel west to east.

Other factors that help spread the disease are cool nights and a lot of moisture. On the other hand, hot, dry weather will slow it.

For now, Seebold is most worried about the disease striking greenhouses, which house a lot of seedlings still to be set.

“In a greenhouse, it will destroy every plant,” he said.

The UK College of Agriculture, which issued a blue mold warning Wednesday, recommends growers spray fungicide on greenhouse and outdoor beds.

Rick Thomas, whose operation is off St. John Road, already has begun preventative spraying.

The disease usually doesn’t pop up this early, he said. But he didn’t seem rattled.

“Anybody that’s raised tobacco has had blue mold before,” he said. “It’s just something we deal with every year.”

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